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AUTHOR Zanot, Eric J.; Maddox, Lynda M.
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ABSTRACT

Claims that the academic community ignores the subject of subliminal advertising led to a study designed to ascertain the degree to which the topic is introduced in the classroom, what opinions professors offer concerning it, and the source with which they acquaint their students. A questionnaire containing a series of open- and close-ended questions and a demographic survey was completed by 199 faculty who teach advertising-related courses in colleges and universities. Analysis of the data allowed six conclusions: (1) these professors are fully cognizant of the concept of subliminal advertising, and they teach it in their classes; (2) although it is discussed in a wide variety of classes, little class time is devoted to subliminal advertising; (3) subliminal advertising is also discussed in a variety of other departments; (4) educators in advertising or marketing departments teach that subliminal advertising is seldom or never used, and when they do offer opinions, they say it is unethical, unacceptable, or harmless; (5) Wilson Bryan Key is the source commonly associated with the topic by professors when they name individuals or sources; and (6) there are no correlations between what professors say about subliminal advertising and their ages, teaching or professional experience, or whether they teach in an advertising or marketing context. (JL)

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SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING

AND

EDUCATION

by

Dr. Eric J. Zanot
College of Journalism
University of Maryland
College Park, Md. 20742

and

Dr. Lynda M. Maddox
School of Government
and Business Administration
The George Washington University
Washington, D.C. 20052

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Eric J. Zanot

Lynda M. Maddox

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SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING AND EDUCATION

Introduction

The psychological phenomenon of subliminal perception--that is, exposing subjects to stimuli of which they are not consciously aware and the search for the effects of those stimuli-- has attracted and perplexed researchers for almost 100 years. The earliest research generally centered on whether or not subliminal cues could be perceived.[1] Although some of this continues, more recent research has turned to the measurement of effects. Some studies have looked for attitude change while others have looked for behavioral change in their subjects.[2] Most recently, researchers have looked for effects on consumer behavior in research that approximates advertising and marketing settings.[3]

Despite a long history of research on subliminal perception and its possible effects in advertising applications (encompassing many more than the specimen studies listed above), there are few definite conclusions regarding effectiveness. However, the bulk of the research suggests that subliminal stimuli are

not effective in changing attitudes or behavior. This is especially true in advertising applications where the subliminal stimuli must compete with a myriad of stronger, consciously-perceived stimuli.[4]

Although very little academic research suggests subliminal stimulation to be an effective persuasive device, the phenomenon has attracted the attention-- and concern-- of the general public. Subliminal applications to advertising and marketing became known to the general public with the wide-spread dissemination of the results of tests in the 1950s in which James Vicary allegedly increased sales of popcorn and Coca-Cola in theaters through the insertion of subliminal cues in motion pictures. In 1957, in The Hidden Persuaders, Vance Packard summarized these tests and gave many examples of how marketers and advertisers used motivational research techniques to manipulate an unsuspecting public into buying products.[5] A swirl of public debate ensued over the use and effects of subliminal advertising. The U.S. Congress and the Federal Communications Commission considered the legal and moral implications of the matter.

During this period researcher Ralph Haber sought to uncover "exactly what the public believes about subliminal advertising."[6] His study, conducted among 324 subjects in San Francisco and published in 1959, reported that 41 per cent had heard of the phenomenon. Those most aware were likely to be young, male and well educated. Fifty per cent of his sample thought subliminal advertising to be unethical.

During the 1960s the public debate faded, possibly because of the lack of hard evidence concerning either the existence or the effects of subliminal techniques. Approximately one decade passed before interest re-emerged. During the past decade the subject has been popularized in three books by Wilson Bryan Key. His Subliminal Seduction (1974), Media Sexploitation (1976) and Clam Plate Orgy (1980) have sold, in total, slightly more than one million copies.[7] Key claims that subliminal embeds (usually of a sexual nature) are common in advertising today. His claims have been dismissed by academic researchers and advertising executives for lack of scientific documentation.[8] However, he has persistently aired his views on the college lecture circuit, through articles in the press and appearances on radio and television shows. Key admits that some greet his views with hostility

and ridicule.[9] His general stance seems to be that any publicity is good publicity. He also states that "our so-called educational institutions ... have unpardoningly failed to alert us to what has been going on in the mass media."[10] Advertising is commonly taught in either marketing or journalism departments. He describes the latter as "intellectually retrograde" and states "None has as far as anyone can tell from the literature, ever introduced the subject into classrooms."[11]

Key's pronouncements stand in direct contrast to a recent, major study of public attitudes toward subliminal advertising. In part a replication of the Haber study (now over 20 years old), this new study, conducted among the residents of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, showed 78 per cent of the sample were aware of subliminal advertising and 38 per cent could offer a reasonable definition of it in response to an unaided recall question.[12] Although responses differed slightly by question, approximately 50 per cent of the sample thought subliminal advertising to be unethical, unacceptable and immoral. Demographic cross-tabulations revealed education

to be the highest correlate of knowledge of the phenomenon. In addition, respondents were asked where they first learned of subliminal advertising. "Education" drew the highest number of responses.

Rationale and Objectives of the Study

The present study is suggested by the research to date. Despite academic research that shows subliminal techniques to be ineffective, public opinion research shows that the general public is aware and is concerned about applications in advertising and marketing. Although the most recent popularizer, Wilson Bryan Key, contends that educators are loathe to introduce the subject, research suggests the public is most likely to have learned of the phenomenon in a educational setting.

The purpose of this study is to ascertain the degree to which subliminal advertising is introduced in the classroom, what opinions professors offer concerning it and the sources with which they acquaint their students. Cross-tabulations were also used to determine the characteristics of professors most likely to introduce the topic in their lectures.

Methodology

In order to limit the size of the population, the sample selected included all readily-identifiable faculty who teach advertising-related courses in colleges and universities. Operationally, this included the faculty who belong to the American Academy of Advertising (AAA) and/or the Advertising Division of the Association for Education in Journalism (AEJ). Questionnaires with a cover letter and a stamped, addressed return envelope, were sent to 300 educators. The response rate was large; 199 (66 per cent) were completed and returned. Of these, 93 were from professors in journalism or communications while another 89 were from professors of marketing or business. Thus, over 91 per cent of those responding taught in disciplines Key said fail to introduce the subject. Respondents had a wide range of years of teaching experience and professional advertising/marketing related trade experience. The mean was almost 13 years of academic experience and over nine years of professional experience. The questionnaire included a series of open and closed-ended questions relating to the topic. These were followed by questions relating to the demographics

of the professors and their teaching situations. The results were compiled and cross-tabulations made through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Non-parametric statistics were applied where relevant.

Results-- The Extent of Teaching of Subliminal Advertising

Every professor who returned a questionnaire reported he/she had heard of subliminal advertising. Of those, 154 (over 77 per cent) devote some class time to the subject. Very few, however, devote much time to it. One class period or less was the answer given by 144 respondents (72 per cent); only one educator devoted three or more classes to the topic. In 97 cases (49 per cent) the instructor took the initiative by introducing the topic as part of the lecture; in another 72 cases (36 per cent) students introduced the topic by bringing up questions relating to it. No response was offered on this question in 30 cases (15 per cent). See Tables 1-4.

Table 1

Have Heard of Subliminal Advertising...

	n	%
Yes	199	100
No	0	0

Table 2

Do You Devote Class Time to Subliminal Advertising?

	n	%
Yes	154	77
No	45	23

Table 3

Who Usually Introduces Topic of Subliminal Advertising?

	n	%
Instructor	97	49
Students	72	36
No Response	30	15

Table 4

Class Time Devoted to Subliminal Advertising

	n	%
None	45	23
1 class period or less	144	72
2 class periods	9	4
3 class periods or more	1	.5

Respondents were asked to note the courses in which the subject is introduced. This multiple response question produced a broad array of courses; however, the basic principles of advertising or marketing course is by far, the one in which the topic is most likely to be discussed. It was followed in order by courses in consumer behavior, advertising and promotion management, social issues in advertising or marketing, and advertising copy and layout. Professors were also queried as to whether their students reported the subject to be taught in other departments within their universities. A clear majority of 118 (59 per cent) said students reported the subject was taught in other departments while another 68 (34 per cent) could not recall students noting other departments. Thirteen professors (6 per cent) did not respond to the question. When asked which other departments were mentioned, psychology was most frequently noted. This was followed, in order, by departments of sociology, speech, radio-television, and art/graphics. See Tables 5-7.

Table 5

Courses in Which Respondents Discuss Subliminal Advertising (multiple response)

	n
Principles of Advertising (or Marketing)	128
Consumer Behavior	42
Advertising (or Promotion) Management	29
Social Issues in Advertising (or Marketing)	27
Advertising Copywriting and Layout	24
Advertising (or Marketing) Research	19
Advertising Campaigns	14
Mass Media and Society	5
Miscellaneous "Other" Responses	17

Table 6

Is Subliminal Advertising Taught in Other Departments?

	n	%
Yes	118	59
No	68	34
No Response	13	6

Table 7

Other Departments in Which Subliminal Advertising is Taught

	n
Psychology	58
Sociology	23
Speech	20
Radio/Television/Film	20
Humanities/English	9
American Studies	5
Miscellaneous "Other" Responses	5

Results-- Sources and Attitudes Conveyed About Subliminal Advertising

Professors were then asked if they offered their own opinions as to how often subliminal techniques are actually employed in advertising. The most common response-- 54 (27 per cent)-- was "never;" the next most common response-- made by 53 (27 per cent) was "seldom." There were 17 respondents (9 per cent) who thought the technique is "sometimes" employed. Collapsing the "always" and "often" categories yeilded a total of 6 (3 per cent) responses. A large number, 63 respondents (32 per cent) stated they do not offer their own opinions about how often the technique is employed. Six individuals (3 per cent) did not respond. In sum, of all of those who expressed an opinion concerning frequency of use, 82 per cent thought subliminal advertising is used "seldom" or "never." See Table 8.

Teachers were asked a multiple response question relating to the attitudes they convey to their students about the phenomenon. Some 47 (24 per cent) answered they tell students subliminal advertising is unethical and immoral while only 1 responded he/she describes it as ethical and moral.

There were 36 (18 per cent) who convey that it is harmless and 7 (4 per cent) who convey it is harmful. It is described as an unacceptable technique by 64 (32 per cent) and as an acceptable technique by 9 (5 per cent). There are 22 (11 per cent) who describe it as an illegal technique while 11 (6 per cent) describe it as legal. Lastly, 51 (52 per cent) offer no opinions regarding subliminal advertising. See Table 9.

Table 8

Opinion of Frequency Subliminal Advertising is Employed

	n	%
Always	1	.5
Often	5	2
Sometimes	17	8
Seldom	53	27
Never	54	27
Offer No Opinion	63	32
No Response	6	3

Table 9

Attitudes Conveyed Regarding Subliminal Advertising
(multiple response - does not total 100%)

	n	%
Unethical/Immoral	47	24
Ethical/Moral	1	.5
Harmless	36	18
Harmful	7	4
Unacceptable	64	32
Acceptable	9	5
Illegal	22	11
Legal	11	6
Offer No Opinion	51	52

When asked if there were any individuals associated with the phenomenon with whom they acquainted their students, 97 (49 per cent) replied "yes." Wilson Bryan Key was most commonly mentioned, followed by James Vicary and Vance Packard. See Table 10.

The sources of information that professors acquainted their students with were consistent with the above answer regarding individuals. The three most commonly cited sources were all books by Key. Packard's Hidden Persuaders, though 25 years old, followed next. N. F. Dixon's Subliminal Perception: The Nature of A Controversy, a scholarly book on the subject, was the only other source to receive more than three mentions. See Table 11.

Table 10

Individuals Associate with Subliminal Advertising

	n
Wilson Bryan Key	78
James Vicary	25
Vance Packard	16
N. F. Dixon	6

Table 11

Sources Associated with
Subliminal Advertising

	n
Subliminal Seduction	78
Media Sexploitation	35
Clam Plate Orgy	19
Hidden Persuaders	14
Subliminal Perception	6

In an open-ended question respondents were asked if they would like to add any additional comments about the teaching of subliminal advertising. Over half, 101 (51 per cent), chose to do so. These were loosely categorized as to whether they were negative, neutral or positive. The negatives, some 80 (80 per cent) of the 101, tended to be strong, volatile expressions that subliminal advertising exists as a concept but not as an advertising practice. Typical of these are the comments: "How do you teach something that doesn't exist?" and "My opinion is that the whole thing is a myth, although one that intrigues students. I take about one hour to burst this balloon every semester" and "20 plus years in the agency business and I never saw it used once."

There were 17 (17 per cent of the comments) that were classified as neutral. Typical of these responses were: "The basic view that I present is that its effects can neither be proven nor disproven" and "The history is important and should be covered sometime in the student's career." Only 4 (4 per cent of the comments) could be classified as positive. Typical was the comment: "Subliminal advertising is a live issue and should be discussed in advertising classes."

The educators were asked four demographic questions relating to the department in which they teach, their age, years of teaching experience and years of professional experience. These independent variables were cross-tabulated with answers to some questions in the questionnaire. Appropriate nonparametric statistical tests were applied. Although some tendencies were observed, there were no significant results nor were there any strong correlations. In sum, the cross-tabulation revealed that there are no statistically significant differences in what professors are saying about the phenomenon by department, age, teaching or professional experience.

Summary and Conclusions

- Professors of advertising in journalism and marketing departments are fully cognizant of the concept of subliminal advertising and teach it in their classes. This finding is consistent with public opinion studies that show public awareness of the phenomenon correlates with education. The finding is inconsistent with Key's assertion that educators in these areas never introduce the subject in the classroom.

- The subject is discussed in a wide variety of different classes but professors seldom devote more than one lecture to it. The subject is brought up most often in introductory survey-type classes. A partial explanation for the wide variety of other classes is the finding that students often bring up subliminal advertising even when it is not found in the professor's notes for a given class.

- Professors of advertising in journalism and marketing departments report that their students say subliminal advertising is discussed in a variety of other departments within the university. Classes in departments of the social sciences are most likely the sources of additional discussion of the topic. An implication

is that professors in these departments may be able to shed additional light on the perceptual processes involved in subliminal perception. Another implication is that these professors are not as familiar with either the advertising process or advertising practice and, therefore, know less about subliminal applications to advertising.

• Professors of advertising in journalism or marketing departments teach that subliminal advertising is seldom or never used. When they offer other opinions, they say it is unethical, unacceptable and harmless. At first glance, the finding that it is "harmless" seems inconsistent with the other findings in this area. However, that is reconciled by the fact that professors feel the technique is seldom employed-- hence, harmless. The over-all findings in this area are somewhat inconsistent with the public opinion studies that show a relatively high degree of awareness among the public and a moderate willingness to believe that advertisers do employ such techniques. This inconsistency is tempered by the fact that, although education is the major correlate of awareness, the mass media and books are listed as additional sources of awareness. Perhaps the moderate

willingness to believe that advertisers do employ subliminal advertising is also due to the wariness with which the general public treats advertising and the recognition that advertising is a source of partial, subjective information designed to persuade.

- Wilson Bryan Key is the source commonly associated with subliminal advertising by professors when they name individuals or sources. This finding seems consistent with the belief that the re-emergence of interest in subliminal advertising is due, at least in part, to the popularization of the subject from Key's books during the past decade. However, the other results and the number and volatility of the open-ended comments suggest that Key and his work are generally portrayed in a negative and unflattering manner.

- There are no correlations between what professors are saying about subliminal advertising with their ages, teaching or professional experience or whether they teach advertising in a journalism or marketing context. Put more simply, professors with differing backgrounds are saying approximately the same things about subliminal advertising to their classes.

FOOTNOTES

1. Pierce, C.S. and J. Jastrow, "On Small Difference of Sensation," Memoranda of the National Academy of Sciences, Vol. 3, 1884, pp. 73-83.

2. An example of a study dealing with attitude change is McGinnies, E., "Emotionality and Perceptual Defense," Psychological Review, Vol. 56, 1949, pp. 244-251; an example of one on behavioral effects is Bevan, W., "Subliminal Stimulation: A Pervasive Problem for Psychology," Psychological Bulletin, Feb., 1964, pp. 81-99.

3. DeFleur, M. and R. Petranoff, "A Televised Test of Subliminal Persuasion," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 23, 1959, pp. 168-180. For a more recent study see Kelly, S., "Subliminal Embeds in Print Advertising: A Challenge to Advertising Ethics," Journal of Advertising, Summer, 1979, pp. 20-24.

4. Dixon, D. F., Subliminal Perception: The Nature of A Controversy (London: McGraw-Hill, 1971). See esp. p. 85. Also see, Severin, W. and J. Tankard, Communication Theories (New York: Hastings House, 1979).

5. Packard, V., The Hidden Persuaders (New York: David McKay Co., 1957).

6. Haber, R., "Public Attitudes Regarding Subliminal Advertising," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 23, 1959, pp. 291-293.

7. Key, W. B., Subliminal Seduction (New York: Prentice Hall, 1974); Media Sexploitation (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1976); and, Clam Plate Orgy and Other Techniques for Manipulating Your Behavior (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1980). The sales estimates of the books are from Key's paperback publisher, The New American Library, New York, phone call, Oct. 21, 1981.

8. Key, Clam Plate Orgy, pp. 23-26, details many negative comments from professionals. Severin and Tankard's Communication Theories, p. 139, serves as an example of a strong rebuttal from academics.

9. Key, Clam Plate Orgy, ch. 8.

10. Key, Subliminal Seduction, p. 189.

11. Key, Subliminal Seduction, pp. 189-190.

12. "Public Perceptions of Subliminal Advertising," in submission for publication. Authors not revealed because one is also involved in authorship of this article with attendant desire not to interfere with blind review.

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